



July 22, 2006

I – 5 AND OUR FUTURE

The widening and improvement of I-5 between the Thurston County line (north of Centralia), and Rush Road (south of Chehalis) is critically important to the future of Centralia, Chehalis, and Lewis County. The final design will define our transportation corridor for the next 75 years. It is imperative that we select the very best design. There is no solution that will not have profound impacts for our communities. In many ways, this change will be just as profound as the 1956 shift from US 99 to I-5. Everyone will be effected, some more than others.

I hope everyone, in all communities, will be very careful to evaluate all of the alternatives and their impacts before settling on a final decision. In Lewis County, we must remember that WSDOT and USDOT are primarily concerned with freight mobility. It is up to us, in the local communities, to work with them to maintain safety and freight mobility, while creating a design that works for us.

The complexities of the issues involved in this decision are staggering. The following are issues that I have discovered that impact the freeway design:

1. Most properties between Centralia and Chehalis are “wetlands”, thereby requiring extensive mitigation for any encroachment – meaning widening of the freeway.
2. The widening and raising of Airport Road and Louisiana Boulevard, added to the “meander” of the Chehalis River, require that all freeway widening take place east of the current footprint.
3. Traffic counts on I-5 will determine the number of required lanes. The new freeway will have a minimum of six lanes and possibly eight in some locations. At a minimum, the new width of the freeway will be 2-3 times greater.
4. Current freeway requirements specify longer ramps, bigger turning radii for trucks, greater separation between freeway lanes and access lanes, and extended restrictions for access from “on” and “off” ramps.
5. The standard vertical clearance for vehicles traveling under bridges has been increased. Wider bridges over additional lanes of traffic could require girders, which mean bridges might be raised even higher, by 8–10 feet. At Mellen Street, the result of

this increased height would be to further exacerbate the “Mellen Street hump”; further reducing driver visibility.

6. The entire Centralia sewer system is gravity fed to the pump station at Mellen Street. The costs associated with impacting and relocating the pump station would exceed \$14 million dollars, so that is an unlikely option. The location of the pump station means there is very limited space to widen to the West. Adding any additional height (weight to fill) to this intersection would likely crush 50 year old pipes, adding additional millions of dollars to this project. The space on the west side is further constrained by an old landfill between the freeway and the Chehalis River. The impacts associated with these issues necessitate that widening must occur east of its current location.

7. The corridor between Harrison Avenue and Mellen Street is extremely narrow and may require extensive “sea walls” at Plummer Lake, Hays Lake and Borst Park Lake. In addition, this section is constrained by the confluence of the Chehalis and Skookumchuck Rivers. The final design will likely see an extension into part of Borst Park.

8. The level of interlocal traffic between Harrison Avenue and Mellen Street is so great that a new “on ramp”, built to current standards, will likely create a “failing” system and an unacceptable traffic hazard.

9. The issues are much the same at the Chamber Way interchange. I-5 will need to be realigned to the east at the curve, just south of the existing Chamber Way interchange in order to meet current FHWA standards. This realignment may necessitate the adding of a fourth lane in both the north and southbound lanes because of the spacing of the SR6 and Chamber Way interchanges. The result of this realignment and widening will likely result in serious impacts to the existing Maryland frontage road and adjacent properties.

10. During construction of any alternative, traffic may have to be “temporarily” rerouted or shifted, at an additional cost of 20-40% of the entire project. In addition, traffic could and likely would be rerouted away from existing businesses.

11. Construction of the four different projects (from Mellen Street to the Maytown interchange) will take up to seven years, beginning in 2008 and concluding in 2014.

12. The current freeway makes no accommodation for surface water (rain) run-off. The new freeway will be required to collect and treat the surface water. Finding locations and construction of retention ponds will be a major challenge.

13. The pressure valve of increased and increasing traffic on Louisiana Boulevard and Airport Way must be addressed.

These thirteen issues represent most of the “on” freeway issues. In addition, we must address the “off” freeway issues. These issues include:

1. Preservation of quick and easy access to Providence Hospital.
2. Preservation of current businesses and commercial properties on the I-5 corridor.
3. Solution of interlocal traffic flow on the Harrison Avenue, Mellen Street, Chamber Way corridors.
4. Preservation of an entrance to Centralia on Mellen Street.
5. Preservation of an entrance to Chehalis off Chamber Way.
6. Preservation of retail traffic access to the Chehalis Center.
7. Preservation of freeway access to the State Street Business District in Chehalis.
8. Preservation of the integrity and value of residential neighborhoods near I-5.

I hope everyone will withhold their final judgment until a full and complete picture of all viable alternatives can be defined. It isn't possible to fix the freeway and not make changes. The challenge for all of us is to find the best 75 year transportation plan for our communities. There will be more public meetings. WSDOT wants to hear from you. Please come and participate.

Tim A. Browning, Mayor
City of Centralia